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Massé, Michelle A.

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POINTING AT THE MOON: TEACHING AND LEARNING WITHOUT RESISTANCE

APONTANDO PARA A LUA: ENSINANDO E APRENDENDO SEM RESISTÊNCIA

***Michelle A. Massé*[1]**

Abstract
Teachers often embrace narratives in which students' resistance to our teaching marks repression of the truths delivered by our learned selves. In students' counter-narratives, the tale of resistance can morph into one about principled refusal of powerful figures trying to force them into stances not their own. Both stories have strong temporal dimensions in which closure, even if it comes decades later, reveals that one party or the other was indeed influenced and changed, whether or not that change was evident at semester's end. My interest here is in how to question premature closure and how to work instead within the suspended liminal time of knowing/not knowing for teacher and student.

Keywords: *Pedagogy. Psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis and narrative. Resistance. Liminality.*

Resumo
Professores com frequência se apegam a narrativas nas quais a resistência dos alunos a nosso ensino marca a evitação das verdades ofertadas por nossos cultos *selves*. Nas contra-narrativas dos alunos, a resistência pode se metamorfosear em uma história sobre a recusa, por questão de princípios, de figuras poderosas tentando forçá-los para instâncias que não eles mesmos. Ambas as histórias têm fortes dimensões temporais nas quais um encerramento, mesmo se ele vem décadas mais tarde, revela que uma parte ou a outra foi, de fato, influenciada e se transformou, tendo ou não tal transformação ficado evidente ao final do semestre. Meu interesse aqui é em como problematizar o encerramento prematuro, trabalhando, em vez disso, no âmbito da suspensão do limiar de tempo de saber/não saber para professor e aluno.

Palavras-chave: Pedagogia. Psicanálise. Psicanálise e narrative. Resistência. Limiaridade.

In the three years that Marshall Alcorn, I, and others have developed the Pedagogy, Culture, and Society panels for the Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society (APCS) annual conferences, "resistance" has been our key topic, whether in outlining the "resistance" of heroism or its obdurate counterpart in both student and teacher, the "resistance" that blindly denies insight. In other forums, I have addressed a related strand that's interwoven in classroom practice: narcissism and pedagogy. After having taught Eve Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* last year, however, I noted shifts in my thinking about both topics. Although I certainly talked about the (limited) intersubjective space between me and my students, and the psychoanalytic implications of what happened there, that space seemed

[1] Diretora do Women's and Gender Studies e Professora de Inglês na Louisiana State University. E-mail: mmasse@lsu.edu – Louisiana, Estados Unidos.

increasingly to be colored by emotion as well as thought, emotion that all too often I trained myself and them to contain, deny, displace, or project as part of becoming "educated."

The evolution in my understanding of what happened in my classes meshed with Sedgwick's own. Sedgwick comments that, over time, not only has her attention turned more directly to pedagogy, but "my classroom life has grown consistently more textured and relaxed" (1995, p. 3). That statement resonated with me. I was interested too by her increasing scepticism about binaries, and by the trajectory she describes of the book itself, as she traces its decreasing emphasis upon shame: "By the end of the book, the positive affects (interest-excitement and, especially, enjoyment-joy, in Tomkin's schema) are much more involving" (1995, p. 21). My original plan was that, given Marshall's strong interest in Tomkins and shame, my complementary presentation would focus upon Sedgwick and positive affect--thus, not coincidentally, giving me the pleasure of providing the happy ending to our discussion.

That plan changed, as did the talk's focus. The original title for this talk, in line with our early panel planning for 2010, was "Sublime Resistance and Ridiculous Shame: Silvan Tomkins, Eve Sedgwick, and the Classroom." The chiasmus of that somewhat ponderous title, like the implicit opposition of shame and joy I mentioned, point to a problem signalled by their neat binary assumptions. Further, one term inevitably becomes ascendant within such binaries and creates a temporal, causal dimension: shame turns to joy; shame is shamed by resistance. As I thought about some of the titles of my prior talks for the sequence in light of re-reading Sedgwick, I saw the same troubling balance of the scales that just re-created a problematic model: e.g., "Resistance and Counter-Resistance at All Cost: The Price of Conflict between Teachers and Students" (2007) and "Workshopping Problems in the Emotional Assimilation of Knowledge: Faculty Resistance to Graduate Student Resistance" (2009). In re-titling the 2010 talk for this essay."Pointing at the Moon: Teaching and Learning without Resistance," I draw upon the amusing but profoundly insightful anecdote Sedgwick provides about the interaction between herself and her cat.

In her chapter, "Pedagogy of Buddhism," Sedgwick refers to research speculating that cats bringing "small, wounded animals into the house" are not proffering "a servile offering in the [human's] honor," not bestowing a "gift," but rather attempting to teach the human to hunt. This lesson is one few humans want to learn, any more than Marshall's students want to learn more about eating dead rats. The affective register of our desire not to know (or not to learn) marks, Sedgwick states, "another mistake about mimesis: the cat's assumption that we identify with it

strongly enough to want to act more like it (e.g., eat live rodents)" (1995, p. 153-154). The analogy to the classroom is obvious, as Sedgwick points out. Our students sniff at what we put before them, while we all too often exhibit our disgust at what they in turn present us. "Perhaps their implication has been: Try it my way--if you're going to teach me. Or even: I have something more important to teach you than you have to teach me" (1995, p. 154).

Sedgwick's instruction continues as she mulls over her own interspecies teaching.

> Whenever I want my cat to look at something instructive--a full moon, say, or a photograph of herself--a predictable choreography ensues. I point at the thing I want her to look at, and she, roused to curiosity, fixes her attention on the tip of my extended index fingers and begins to explore it with delicate sniffs.
> Every time this scene of failed pedagogy gets enacted (and it's frequent, because I am no better at learning not to point than my cat is at learning not to sniff) the two of us are caught in a pedagogical problematic. . . . (1995, p. 168)

One of my own case studies I've mulled over presented a similar "pedagogical problematic," which was also somewhat like Marshall's second example about his careful staging of a course sequence on Marx. I was teaching a the first semester of "World Masterworks," the only 2000-level general education course that fit my student Ben's schedule. The reading included the graphic medieval text "The Dream of the Rood," in which a cross, dripping gouts of human blood, tells us about having been the cross for Christ's crucifixion. Sporting a pony tail long after hippies were common, and a pierced ear long before men's earrings were, Ben had taken several years off before deciding upon college. After we read "The Dream of the Rood," Ben came to see me, angry, disturbed, and repulsed by the "disgusting" poem, and questioning why we should have to read such a "gross" text at a state university. I passionately lectured (the correct verb) him about the need to hear other voices, know other eras, respect other beliefs. Ben sceptically agreed with the point, but said he still loathed "Dream."

A year later, a now more traditional-looking Ben came to visit again. He told me that my class was the best he'd ever had--and I sat up a bit straighter in my chair. He explained that because of it and me, his whole life had changed--and I beamed and sat straighter still. Then he handed me a brochure for the Christian fundamentalist church he had joined and told me how proud he'd be if I'd go to a service so he could introduce me as the teacher who brought him to Jesus. My smile and my posture slipped.

During the 2007 panel at which I first presented this story, I laughed at myself and the overweening teacherly pride that underlies the anecdote--a laughter that, after all, was a hair's breadth from anger and shame, both at myself and him. As I think about the story yet again,

however, I am more struck than ever by the "right" and "wrong" answers implicit in my account, the implicit performative utterance/enactment of "Shame on you! (And shame on me too)!" In my previous commentary, my own wounded narcissism was obvious, as well as my chagrined exasperation at what the student "failed" to learn and my astonishment at his purblind misprision. Sedgwick's anecdote about lessons that don't "take" shed further light on this exchange. I suspect that, were Ben to hear my explanation of our learning together, he would conclude that he was fortunate because, while I kept insisting--constantively and performatively--that he could only learn the subject--and learn to be a subject--by looking at my finger, he found the moon. Furthermore, converted or not, he might well want to point a different finger back at me as he exercised and exorcized his own anger and shame.

As I thought more about that anecdote, more about how I work at understanding my classes and my life, about teaching terminable and interminable, as well as about the binaries Sedgwick so adroitly places beside one another rather than beyond or beneath (8), I saw how quick I am to seek closure. I realized yet again how readily I, a feminist scholar and a narratologist, not only consistently reverse the ascendant pole of a binary while triumphantly thinking that I've evaded it, but also how readily I create causative narratives and closure rather than resting in indeterminacy by creating the "pleasurable" teaching stories I was at first thinking about for this panel.

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Here's a partial list of key binaries Sedgwick identifies:

silence	speech
knowledge	recognition
blindness	insight
hiddenness	exposure
repression	liberation
hegemony	subversion
beneath	beyond
individualism	affirmative identification
interest	desire not to know

In looking at the first binary, silence/speech, as an example of what I'm talking about, anyone can recognize the meta-narrative of feminists and subalterns: not speaking is bad; learning how to speak is good. We can also see a good story line in the reverse direction, however: we deafen ourselves with our own endless chatter and must learn to listen. Speech is bad, then; learning silence is good. The latter conclusion is powerfully illustrated through a request by Sedgwick's friend, Michael Lynch, that there be no music during the arrival of guests at his funeral: "I like such awkward silences, though many resist them, especially in my classes. But a lot goes on during them" (1995, p. 33).

Speech and silence aren't the ostensible binary upon which I'm going to focus , though, important as it is. My focus is going to be on the last set: the interest/desire not to know pairing that so often recoils into contempt and disgust or unfurls into acceptance and working through. I want to avoid those narratives, however. I'm trying not to point at the moon for the reader (or the student) but instead to posit spaces and times of liminality and non-movement, as instances of what Sedgwick intriguingly calls "textured feeling," although she doesn't address this particular configuration. "Texture, in short, comprises an array of perceptual data that includes repetition, but whose degree of organization hovers just below the level of shape or structure" (p. 16). Teaching moments of seeming stasis, poised in indeterminacy, resting in potentiality, are my near-sighted focus here.

The cognitive dissonance of interest/desire not to know leads in some instances neither to a cognitive congruence won at the price of disavowing one dimension of knowledge, nor to what Sedgwick calls "affirmative identification," but rather to a (somewhat) willing suspension of disbelief, in which mutually antithetical views are held simultaneously without splitting. My classes, frequently taught on feminist or psychoanalytic topics, pique such interest through their very titles, regardless of my function as teacher. There is thus a certain self-selection among my students, a strong receptivity to the "sounds true" (1995, p. 163) conviction Sedgwick talks about, at both ends of the incorporation/denial spectrum, as the following mini-cases indicate.

Story # 1. In an undergraduate class on women's fiction, I taught Agnes Smedley's novel *Daughter of Earth*. The protagonist, Marie, is raped by the leader of a political movement, a leader idolized by her partner and others, a leader thought to be the hope of the revolution--and a leader who , in an effort to discredit her, eventually claims that she seduced him. Marie is silent after the rape for fear of damaging the movement, and her silence damns her when he eventually speaks.

One student, Amelia, burst out in tears during class, stating that she too had been raped in what she thought was a relationship of trust. The journal she handed in that day also told me about that event years ago, as well as attesting to frequent feelings of despair and hopelessness since. I called the student, I called the Rape Crisis Center, I called Student Health, I called the Dean of Students. Poised between knowledge and recognition, Amelia insisted to me that she had no interest in seeing a therapist, no interest in joining a group, no wish to use me as a surrogate counselor (as I feared). She just wanted to come to class while she "thought about things," despite my offering her an excused absence while we were discussing the book. And so, for three more classes, Amelia came to class, sat slightly outside our small circle of a dozen or so, and quietly wept.

I was very apprehensive for Amelia and about Amelia. What became the most startling development for me, though, was her peers' easy acceptance of this very strange classroom configuration. Strangers to one another except for their enrollment in this class, they continued to talk about the novel. Every now and again one would turn and say "You O.K., Amelia?" and then return to the discussion. I once saw a student almost absent-mindedly lean over and pat her on the knee. With the next novel, Amelia returned fully to the circle. I inquired a couple of times during the semester about what further information or resources she might want, and she said none. She completed the course successfully and, I learned upon inquiring later, graduated without incident.

Story # 2. In a current sophomore-level "Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies" class, the students' first journal is a directed entry in which I ask them to introduce themselves and to say something about their understanding of feminism. Hadley situated herself in one brief paragraph. The beloved child of a stable Christian family, economically secure, attractive, and with solid academic abilities, Hadley recognized herself as a child of privilege and extraordinarily fortunate. "I am blessed to be able to say I come from an educated, wealthy background. Both of my parents are conservative and very active in politics. I haven't faced any struggle within my life yet. My future isn't a mystery or scary. I know that I will fiscally always be taken care of."

The beginning of the second paragraph was an abrupt transition. "I differ from my parents and their beliefs by only one thing, I'm gay." The next four paragraphs expanded upon what that meant to her. She talked about how difficult it was to know that she would lose family and friends were this ever discovered, and how the task of concealment would be even more difficult in the decades ahead. Concluding that "I'm not really a feminist because I feel that nothing in my life is 'unfair' or need to be improved," Hadley states that she's a Republican and

that "it has never been an issue to demand equality or have to fight about anything other than taxes. . . . I'm happy, that is the key to success."

At least seven of her journals since then have developed the same issue: life in the closet. Hadley talks about steady relationships, and some pleasure in the very concealment, such as putting together a PowerPoint presentation in high school to persuade her parents to send her to a study abroad program that her lover would be participating in. I've given her information on campus groups, suggested readings in addition to those in the class, and offered contact information to teachers and students who'd be glad to speak with her, as well as, again providing referrals to Student Health. She thanks me for the suggestions, but pretty much responds like Amelia, saying that she's content figuratively sitting where she is right now. I suspect that this student has recognition, and is garnering the knowledge to support that recognition; Amelia had knowledge but was just beginning the process of recognition.

Both students seem to abide, seemingly with relative ease, in the eye of the storm, refusing the binaries of knowing/not knowing, knowledge and recognition, interest and the desire not to know. I'd be very interested in hearing about similar experiences, and others' ideas about what's happening. I'm trying to curb my own impulse to "fix it," to write the story of students' development, and to find the closure/solution ***I*** think appropriate. I'm surely learning something, but I don't know what it is yet.

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Marshall was kind enough to send me his drafts, a courtesy I didn't have time to reciprocate. In my responses to him, I noted that I suspected that I was reading the beginnings of an intriguing article, but was a tad doubtful about a 12-minute talk. As I myself hear the clock tick, I nonetheless want to add an envoi on a topic associated with the suspended/bracketed binary: time. There is an obvious temporal dimension to my examples--there is a past and present to my student anecdotes, and a strong teleological impulse as we wonder what their futures will bring, and how those understandings in future time will shape their recollection of present and past time. That same tension powerfully underlies the rhythm, direction, and content of Sedgwick's text. I read Sedgwick's text for the second time during the semester she died in spring of 2009. She comments on her own diagnosis of cancer and refers to friends who have died, such as Michael Lynch, whose funeral directives I cited above, or Brian Selsky, whom she acknowledges in the headnote for the "Pedagogy of Buddhism" chapter: "This essay is full of the

memory of my friend and student Brian Selsky, who took his life on Yom Kippur of 1997." Although I did not know Sedgwick personally, reading Sedgwick now is also full of her memory. Much of the text traces the merging of teacher and student, a teacher's influence over time, the conflation of the individual and of others' needs for the teacher in what was a key Buddhist text for Sedgwick, Sogyal Rinpoche's *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. As Sedgwick contemplates her own end, she looks to teaching as a field that "thrives on personality and intimate emotional relation. "At the same time, it functions as a mysteriously powerful solvent of individual identity" (1995, p. 160). "Ever generous, ever seeking a "mode of teaching" and of thinking that "could nurture the individual fates as well as the common needs of those receiving it" (1995, p. 162), Sedgwick has opened the door of the classroom, as well as many others, to the generations of teachers and students who will follow her.

REFERENCES

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